

Migration: As an Issue of Bihar Assembly Election 2020

Context

Images of thousands of migrants forced to return on foot to their home-states after the sudden lockdown would remain one of the most disturbing reminder of the immediate impacts of COVID-19 in India. Majority of these migrants were heading to states like UP and Bihar, the states known for exceptionally high outmigration. In fact, Bihar was among the states receiving largest number of returning migrants during the lockdown period. But the state government was determined to follow the codes of lockdown and was clearly reluctant in letting the migrants enter their own state, the state of Bihar. In many cases, migrants were locked in quarantine centres in very vulnerable condition, sometimes even without food and drinking water. Arrangement of the quarantine centres at the state boarder was pathetic and several reports underscored the prevalence of corruption in quarantine centre management. Many returning migrants had decided to not leave their home-state when they were forced to return after losing work and hope with the COVID outbreak, especially after the sudden imposition of complete lockdown. But their reception in their own home-state and the absence of livelihood options in the state eventually forced them to return to their migration destination. Undoubtedly, plight of migrants and the state's demeaning and even dehumanizing response towards returning migrants was one of the most prominent issues of Bihar in 2020, which also happened to be the state's assembly election year.

The state assembly election was held in late October and early November 2020. By that time, many returning migrants had started returning to their destination states. Bihar's bus stands, railway stations and even the Patna airport was flooded with the state's migrants, waiting to return again to their destination for work. Nonetheless, many of them were still in the state as they were not prepared to take the risk of returning to their migration destination without job. These migrants and their families comprised an important group of voters. One group of migrants even formed a political party and underscored the issues of migrants during the elections. RJD, the main opposition party in Bihar, also raised the plight of Bihari migrants, especially those who returned after the lockdown, during the election. In fact, almost all political parties discussed about migrants and their issues during the election campaigns. Anecdotal evidence suggest that migration played a critical role in last year's assembly elections in Bihar.

Proposed Study

Though migration emerged as a critical issue of 2020 Bihar elections, an inquiry is required to ascertain it's tangible impact. Furthermore, in the wake of upcoming elections in the Eastern India's states of Bengal and Assam, it would be interesting to review and analyse the significance of migration in last year's Bihar assembly election and also how this issue impacted the COVID struck Bihar elections. Calcutta Research Group (CRG) is already conducting studies on election and migration in Assam and Bengal. The proposed study would facilitate in contextualizing the issue of migration in Eastern India's three prime labour sending states.

Study Objectives

The proposed study intends to understand in what ways the plight of migrants impacted voters' as well as contesting candidates' approach towards the issue of migration and thereby the dynamics of Bihar assembly elections 2020. The study would also generate evidence to assess the impact of social institutions like caste and gender vis a vis issues like unemployment and migration on the electoral politics of contemporary Bihar. It is assumed that this analysis would facilitate in comprehending the

varied impact some of the key socio-economic issues on Bihar's electoral politics in general and the 2020 assembly elections in particular.

Empirical Approach

Primary evidence for the study would be generated through in-depth interview of representatives of political parties; migrant workers; journalists, academics and organizations working on the issue of migration. About 10 to 12 people will be approached for the proposed study.

Review of secondary data would mainly include reviewing published and unpublished reports, newspaper articles, research papers etc. In addition, election manifestos of various political parties would be also reviewed for the study.

Expected Outcome

The key outcome of the study would be an analytical report on migration and Bihar assembly election 2020. The findings of this study would also include some policy recommendations to underscore migration as an important political issue of Bihar.